

Our Views: Supreme Court Must Approve Bipartisan Redistricting Maps

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Posted Monday, November 29, 2021 3:45 pm

By The Chronicle Editorial Board

It's not every day that the editorial boards of The Seattle Times and The Chronicle are on the same page, but we find ourselves in full agreement with our journalistic neighbors to the north on a key issue.

The Times is right on target in its call for the Washington State Supreme Court to affirm the maps created by the bipartisan Washington State Redistricting Commission.

In a recent editorial, The Times reminded the court that the majority of the current Supreme Court justices have been appointed by Democratic governors. The board goes on to make the following point: "The perceptions of a process that generates a map by the court thus comprised would likely inflame partisan debate."

The Times is correct but makes this point in an understated way.

We'll say it more bluntly. If the court takes this opportunity to insert itself into partisan redistricting politics, there will be an outcry and a reaction against the court the likes of which our state has not seen.

There is no government action that impacts partisan politics more directly than redistricting. A seemingly boring bureaucratic process involving drawing lines on maps is, in fact, the most important factor determining whether Republican or Democratic candidates win partisan state and congressional legislative offices.

If lines are drawn to create a district where most voters are of one party it's no surprise when that party's candidates win in that district.

It is really that simple and basic.

Our state law requires that following every decade census a bipartisan commission of two Republicans and two Democrats must take public input and then agree on the maps that create the state legislative and congressional district boundaries for the next 10 years. The process was created with two representatives from each party to give both parties equal voice and opportunity to create political competition.

This year, the commissioners agreed to the maps, though the maps were not made public until the day following their deadline.

A wise nonpartisan supreme court would conclude that the four commissioners had a meeting of the minds regarding the maps before the midnight deadline and affirm their maps. Courts of integrity across American history would never insert the judiciary into such a purely political issue.

The question now is whether our current supreme court will insert itself into partisan politics by redrawing the agreed maps. The fear and suspicion of many is that the robes worn by our current supreme court justices hide the Ds emblazoned on their chests and that they are itching to assert their authority to redraw the maps to favor their political party to a degree greater than could be achieved by the bipartisan commission.

The Chronicle hopes that these dark fears about our supreme court are unfounded.

This fear gets to a question that is even deeper and more important than whether Republicans or Democrats win in the coming elections. If our supreme court takes control of drawing new maps, it will put the lie to the image of a court, blindly, impartially, weighing the scales of justice.

Instead, it will appear as a court willing to use its authority to extend the partisan political power of the party that controls state government today.

Taking the wrong step here would generate negative and unforeseeable consequences that would play out over a very long time.

We implore the justices to keep out of partisan politics and affirm the maps agreed upon by the bipartisan redistricting commissioners.